

University of Windsor Scholarship at UWindsor

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 3

May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on N M Nielsen

James Wong

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Wong, James, "Commentary on N M Nielsen" (1999). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 97.
<http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA3/papersandcommentaries/97>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Author: [James Wong](#)

In Response To: NM Nielsen's [Mutual reconstruction of arguments in dialogue](#)

(c)2000 James Wong

If I understood Niels' paper right, its primary aim is to show that "analyzing argument structure is a basic precondition of understanding one another at all in argumentative discourse". "Language users," he says, "employ quasi-logical forms in making sense of arguments" and "what [an analyst] does is ideally a reflection of what language users do all the time in order to understand one another". Niels nicely illustrates this claim in his study of an exchange between two panelists on a television program. Intuitively, Niels' claim sounds right to me. That basic agreement makes commenting on his paper difficult. Nonetheless, there are a couple of points that I want to raise in my commentary.

I shall, first, go over some points that I find puzzling in Niels' paper. Second, I situate Niels' discussion in a different context, one that he may not appreciate. I suggest that the gist of his paper supports the claim that the hermeneutics is inherently critical. Elizabeth Skakoon's paper yesterday deals directly with this issue ([Skakoon 1999](#)); Niels' paper, to my mind, is making a similar point.

1. Nitpicking over details

(a) Niels believes that the proposal that logical forms are used as a principle of interpretation, what he calls a "limited logic", is a "bold" one. I'm not sure what the point is here. Of course, to understand argumentative discourse, one of the things we need to do is to analyze its structure by using logical forms. Now that sounds circular, but what else can we do? There doesn't appear to be anything else that we can use. So I invite Niels to explain why he thinks that it is a bold proposal.

(b) In light of the title of his paper, "Mutual Reconstruction of Arguments in Dialogue," I'm surprised to find Niels' schema of analyzing argumentative discourse to be rather 'static'. They seem not to capture the dynamics of a dialogue. The examples Niels cites suggest that in trying to understand an argument, the participants occupy the positions of antagonist and protagonist, and they remain in those positions. For instance, in his made-up example of an exchange between a doorman and someone wanting to get into a club, the doorman occupies just one position and the visitor another. Indeed, there was no dialogue to speak of in that example. (Parenthetically, providing factual and formal refutations are NO guarantee that one will get into the club. Indeed, a person could get into a whole lot of trouble with a doorman, depending on the illocutionary force of such refutations.)

I would have thought that participants in real-life dialogues cooperatively engage in the to-and-fro of argument and counter-argument, alternatively defending one's position and critically engaging the other's position. So the

person defending her position could in turn question the other's view(s). Further, I believe that a term like 'critical engagement' rather than 'attacking' better captures the sense of cooperation in a constructive dialogue. It is a dialogue after all and not a blood-sport, like gladiators in a ring.

As an example of the dynamic of a cooperative dialogue, let us engage in a bit of mutual reconstruction of arguments. According to Niels, in the exchange between the two panelists on the television program, the negotiated argument takes the form of a conditional argument.

P1 If we include four new Eastern-European member states in the European Union, it would draw a line across Europe. (If p then q . Agreed upon by both parties)

Plus, an interpretation of the recent Amsterdam Treaty

P2 The new Treaty includes four new Eastern-European member states (p)

P1 and P2 yield

P3 It would draw a line across Europe (q , *modus ponens* Affirming the Antecedent)

But both parties agree that nobody wants a curtain across Europe.

P4 Drawing a line across Europe is a bad thing (r)

P5 No line should be drawn across Europe ($\sim q$)

Con. The new treaty should not include four new Eastern-European member states ($\sim p$)

I believe that P4 and P5 together support the conclusion. It would be a kind of *Modus-Tollens* (denying the consequent) argument. P5 may reasonably be interpreted as $\sim q$. Given the reconstruction above, I am puzzled when Niels writes that the antagonist "formally refutes the ... argument on the charge of the fallacy of affirming the antecedent" Affirming the antecedent a fallacy? What Niels said can't be right, affirming the antecedent (*modus ponens*) is a valid argument form. So what on earth could he mean by the claim that there is a fallacy involved? Perhaps it is this. P3 and P4 are clearly in tension with each other. And given P4 and P5, the Amsterdam Treaty should not include the four new member states from Eastern-Europe. I think that this is what Niels wants to claim, but I'm not sure. So I invite him to explain it to us.

Here's my counter-argument:

P1 In his example, Niels claims that the antagonist refutes the negotiated argument on the charge of the fallacy of affirming the

antecedent.

P2 Affirming the antecedent is not a fallacy

SC Niels' claim that the negotiated argument is refuted because it is fallacious is problematic

MC The problem with the negotiated argument lies elsewhere.

The counter-argument is an invitation to Niels to present his case. For example, he may say that when I said 'the fallacy of affirming the antecedent' I meant *x*. To which, I can respond in various ways, such as I may ask for further clarification about *x* and invite Niels to join me in further negotiations or I may be convinced by the new presentation and say, 'Now I get it'. Here, I believe, we get a better sense of the dialogical nature of mutual reconstruction.

None of the foregoing gainsays Niels' principal claim that the use of logical forms is a "precondition of all investigations, one that we cannot – regrettably [why regrettably, if they are part of the preconditions of understanding discourses?] – escape from". Indeed I want to use Niels' insight in another context. I suggest that Niels' discussion can be used to support the claim that hermeneutics inherently has a critical component. If so, critiques of the notion of a 'horizon' – a central idea in philosophical hermeneutics, especially in Hans-Georg Gadamer's writings – that it is conservative can be met.

2. Everyday Logic of Language and Hermeneutics

Very quickly then. If I understood Gadamer right, a central feature of his hermeneutics is the claim that understanding is historically conditioned. The range of possible interpretations that we can adopt is informed by concepts and beliefs, what Gadamer calls variously 'prejudgements' or 'fore-meanings', of our culture, the times. These prejudgements, or more provocatively still, 'prejudices' as Gadamer calls them, bound a horizon of possibilities, "a range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (Gadamer 1984, 269). So in reading a text, we do not approach it as blank slates; rather, we contribute positively by projecting a meaning onto the whole of the text, based on *our* understanding of the words, our beliefs and concepts.

Though bounded by a horizon, our understanding is not entirely determined by it. In Gadamer's view, a horizon is not an unchanging set of beliefs that fixes forever our views; rather one's horizon is essentially open because our beliefs can change. Some will have to be jettisoned because they are no longer applicable because they hinder our understanding. The problem is that we do not know in advance which beliefs are productive and which hindering (Gadamer 1984, 263).

Consider the following. In reading a text, we discover that, regarding a certain subject matter, say teen pregnancy, that it holds *p*, whereas we are more likely

to believe q . Suppose p and q are contraries. The difference would provoke a reassessment of our background of beliefs. Which should we hold? Should we dogmatically cling to q ? Or should we accept p uncritically? Some critics have charged that, despite his claim that horizons are open, Gadamer's position ultimately is a conservative one because alternatives would not be considered seriously given one's 'horizon' of expectations. Here I believe that Niels' discussion about the preconditions of understanding argument discourse is relevant.

On Niels' view, in such a situation to understand p rightly, we need to provide a set of reasons in support of it, i.e. we reconstruct an argument. Similarly, we construct an argument for q , because our belief has been shaken. We then evaluate *both* arguments for their coherence, as well as "relevance and informativeness" (see also [Skakoon 1999](#)). There is a dialogue here between the two positions p and q . Using the principle of charity and other considerations, negotiated positions will be established. In the process, we may come to see that the reasons adduced in support of q are no longer adequate in the face of the argument for p . Ideally, we would then go on to adopt the view that gives a "deeper understanding of the issue" or is the "best possible position" given the evidence ([Skakoon 1999](#)).

The point is that the notion of a horizon commits us to take into account alternative positions. To do so, we would subject those views and our own to critical analyses by recasting them as arguments, giving reasons in their support. To do so, we use argumentative structures at our disposal as everyday language users, which is Niels' claim. What is interesting here is that the defense of hermeneutics is built on the insights from a rather unsuspected source, the study of argumentation, typically the domain of analytic philosophers. Hopefully, the present example would encourage more boundary crossings in the future, which would be a good thing.

References

Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1984), *Truth & Method*, New York: Crossroads

Nielsen, Niels Moeller (1999), "Mutual Reconstruction of Arguments in Dialogue," Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation Meeting, Brock University

Skakoon, Elizabeth (1999), "Hermeneutics, Rhetoric and Informal Logic," Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation Meeting, Brock University
